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EZRA POUND: HIS METRIC AND POETRY

By T. S. Eliot

CONTENTS

[BOOKS BY EZRA POUND](#)

[EZRA POUND: HIS METRIC AND POETRY](#)

[BIBLIOGRAPHY OF BOOKS](#)

BOOKS BY EZRA POUND

PROVENÇA, being poems selected from Personae, Exultations, and Canzoniere. (Small, Maynard, Boston, 1910)

THE SPIRIT OF ROMANCE: An attempt to define somewhat the charm of the pre-renaissance literature of Latin-Europe. (Dent, London, 1910; and Dutton, New York)

THE SONNETS AND BALLATE OF GUIDO CAVALCANTI. (Small, Maynard, Boston, 1912)

RIPOSTES. (Swift, London, 1912; and Mathews, London, 1913)

DES IMAGISTES: An anthology of the Imagists, Ezra Pound, Aldington, Amy Lowell, Ford Maddox Hueffer, and others

GAUDIER-BRZESKA: A memoir. (John Lane, London and New York, 1916)

NOH: A study of the Classical Stage of Japan with Ernest Fenollosa. (Alfred A. Knopf, New York, 1917; and Macmillan, London, 1917)

LUSTRA with Earlier Poems. (Alfred A. Knopf, New York, 1917)

PAVANNES AND DIVISIONS. (Prose. In preparation: Alfred A. Knopf, New York)

EZRA POUND: HIS METRIC AND POETRY

I

"All talk on modern poetry, by people who know," wrote Mr. Carl Sandburg in *Poetry*, "ends with dragging in Ezra Pound somewhere. He may be named only to be cursed as wanton and mocker, poseur, trifler and vagrant. Or he may be classed as filling a niche today like that of Keats in a preceding epoch. The point is, he will be mentioned."

This is a simple statement of fact. But though Mr. Pound is well known, even having been the victim of interviews for Sunday papers, it does not follow that his work is thoroughly known. There are twenty people who have their opinion of him for every one who has read his writings with any care. Of those twenty, there will be some who are shocked, some who are ruffled, some who are irritated, and one or two whose sense of dignity is outraged. The twenty-first critic will probably be one who knows and admires some of the poems, but who

either says: "Pound is primarily a scholar, a translator," or "Pound's early verse was beautiful; his later work shows nothing better than the itch for advertisement, a mischievous desire to be annoying, or a childish desire to be original." There is a third type of reader, rare enough, who has perceived Mr. Pound for some years, who has followed his career intelligently, and who recognizes its consistency.

This essay is not written for the first twenty critics of literature, nor for that rare twenty-second who has just been mentioned, but for the admirer of a poem here or there, whose appreciation is capable of yielding him a larger return. If the reader is already at the stage where he can maintain at once the two propositions, "Pound is merely a scholar" and "Pound is merely a yellow journalist," or the other two propositions, "Pound is merely a technician" and "Pound is merely a prophet of chaos," then there is very little hope. But there are readers of poetry who have not yet reached this hypertrophy of the logical faculty; their attention might be arrested, not by an outburst of praise, but by a simple statement. The present essay aims merely at such a statement. It is not intended to be either a biographical or a critical study. It will not dilate upon "beauties"; it is a summary account of ten years' work in poetry. The citations from reviews will perhaps stimulate the reader to form his own opinion. We do not wish to form it for him. Nor shall we enter into other phases of Mr. Pound's activity during this ten years; his writings and views on art and music; though these would take an important place in any comprehensive biography.

II

Pound's first book was published in Venice. Venice was a halting point after he had left America and before he had settled in England, and here, in 1908, "A Lume Spento" appeared. The volume is now a rarity of literature; it was published by the author and made at a Venetian press where the author was able personally to supervise the printing; on paper which was a remainder of a supply which had been used for a History of the Church. Pound left Venice in the same year, and took "A Lume Spento" with him to London. It was not to be expected that a first book of verse, published by an unknown American in Venice, should attract much attention. The "Evening Standard" has the distinction of having noticed the volume, in a review summing it up as:

wild and haunting stuff, absolutely poetic, original, imaginative, passionate, and spiritual. Those who do not consider it crazy may well consider it inspired. Coming after the trite and decorous verse of most of our decorous poets, this poet seems like a minstrel of Provence at a suburban musical evening.... The unseizable magic of poetry is in the queer paper volume, and words are no good in describing it.

As the chief poems in "A Lume Spento" were afterwards incorporated in "Personae," the book demands mention only as a date in the author's history. "Personae," the first book published in London, followed early in 1909. Few poets have undertaken the siege of London with so little backing; few books of verse have ever owed their success so purely to their own merits. Pound came to London a complete stranger, without either literary patronage or financial means. He took "Personae" to Mr. Elkin Mathews, who has the glory of having published Yeats' "Wind Among the Reeds," and the "Books of the Rhymers' Club," in which many of the poets of the '90s, now famous, found a place. Mr. Mathews first suggested, as was natural to an unknown author, that the author should bear part of the cost of printing. "I have a shilling in my pocket, if that is any use to you," said the latter. "Well," said Mr. Mathews, "I want to publish it anyway." His acumen was justified. The book was, it is true, received with opposition, but it was received. There were a few appreciative critics, notably Mr. Edward Thomas, the poet (known also as "Edward Eastaway"); he has since been killed in France). Thomas, writing in the "English Review" (then in its brightest days under the editorship of Ford Madox Hueffer), recognized the first-hand intensity of feeling in "Personae":

He has ... hardly any of the superficial good qualities of modern versifiers.... He has not the current melancholy or resignation or unwillingness to live; nor the kind of feeling for nature which runs to minute description and decorative metaphor. He cannot be usefully compared with any living writers;... full of personality and with such power to express it, that from the first to the last lines of most of his poems he holds us steadily in his own pure grave, passionate world.... The beauty of it (In Praise of Ysolt) is the beauty of passion, sincerity and intensity, not of beautiful words and images and suggestions ... the thought dominates the words and is greater than they are. Here (Idyll for Glaucus) the effect is full of human passion and natural magic, without any of the phrases which a reader of modern verse would expect in the treatment of such a subject.

Mr. Scott James, in the "Daily News," speaks in praise of his metres:

At first the whole thing may seem to be mere madness and rhetoric, a vain exhibition of force and passion without beauty. But, as we read on, these curious metres of his seem to have a law and order of their own; the brute force of Mr. Pound's imagination seems to impart some quality of infectious beauty to his words. Sometimes there is a strange beating of anapaests when he quickens to his subject; again and again he unexpectedly ends a line with the second half of a reverberant hexameter:

"Flesh shrouded, bearing the secret."

... And a few lines later comes an example of his favourite use of spondee, followed by dactyl and spondee, which comes in strangely and, as we first read it, with the appearance of discord, but afterwards seems to gain a curious and distinctive vigour:

"Eyes, dreams, lips, and the night goes."

Another line like the end of a hexameter is

"But if e'er I come to my love's land."

But even so favourable a critic pauses to remark that

He baffles us by archaic words and unfamiliar metres; he often seems to be scorning the limitations of form and metre, breaking out into any sort of expression which suits itself to his mood.

and counsels the poet to "have a little more respect for his art."

It is, in fact, just this adaptability of metre to mood, an adaptability due to an intensive study of metre, that constitutes an important element in Pound's technique. Few readers were prepared to accept or follow the amount of erudition which entered into "Personae" and its close successor, "Exultations," or to devote the care to reading them which they demand. It is here that many have been led astray. Pound is not one of those poets who make no demand of the reader; and the casual reader of verse, disconcerted by the difference between Pound's poetry and that on which his taste has been trained, attributes his own difficulties to excessive scholarship on the part of the author. "This," he will say of some of the poems in Provençal form or on Provençal subjects, "is archaeology; it requires knowledge on the part of its reader, and true poetry does not require such knowledge." But to display knowledge is not the same thing as to expect it on the part of the reader; and of this sort of pedantry Pound is quite free. He is, it is true, one of the most learned of poets. In America he had taken up the study of Romance Languages with the intention of teaching. After work in Spain and Italy, after pursuing the Provençal verb from Milan to Freiburg, he deserted the thesis on Lope de Vega and the Ph.D. and the professorial chair, and elected to remain in Europe. Mr. Pound has spoken out his mind from time to time on the subject of scholarship in American universities, its deadness, its isolation from genuine appreciation, and the active creative life of literature. He has always been ready to battle against pedantry. As for his own learning, he has studied poetry carefully, and has made use of his study in his own verse. "Personae" and "Exultations" show his talent for turning his studies to account. He was supersaturated in Provençal; he had tramped over most of the country; and the life of the courts where the Troubadours thronged was part of his own life to him. Yet, though "Personae" and "Exultations" do exact something from the reader, they do not require a knowledge of Provençal or of Spanish or Italian. Very few people know the Arthurian legends well, or even Malory (if they did they might realize that the Idylls of the King are hardly more important than a parody, or a "Chaucer retold for Children"); but no one accuses Tennyson of needing footnotes, or of superciliousness toward the uninstructed. The difference is merely in what people are prepared for; most readers could no more relate the myth of Atys correctly than they could give a biography of Bertrand de Born. It is hardly too much to say that there is no poem in these volumes of Mr. Pound which needs fuller explanation than he gives himself. What the poems do require is a trained ear, or at least the willingness to be trained.

The metres and the use of language are unfamiliar. There are certain traces of modern influence. We cannot agree with Mr. Scott-James that among these are "W. E. Henley, Kipling, Chatterton, and especially Walt Whitman"—least of all Walt Whitman. Probably there are only two: Yeats and Browning. Yeats in "La Fraisne," in "Personae," for instance, in the attitude and somewhat in the vocabulary:

*I wrapped my tears in an ellum leaf
And left them under a stone,
And now men call me mad because I have thrown
All folly from me, putting it aside
To leave the old barren ways of men ...*

For Browning, Mr. Pound has always professed strong admiration (see "Mesmerism" in "Personae"); there are traces of him in "Cino" and "Famam Librosque Cano," in the same volume. But it is more profitable to comment upon the variety of metres and the original use of language.

Ezra Pound has been fathered with vers libre in English, with all its vices and virtues. The term is a loose one—any verse is called "free" by people whose ears are not accustomed to it—in the second place, Pound's use of this medium has shown the temperance of the artist, and his belief in it as a vehicle is not that of the fanatic. He has said himself that when one

has the proper material for a sonnet, one should use the sonnet form; but that it happens very rarely to any poet to find himself in possession of just the block of stuff which can perfectly be modelled into the sonnet. It is true that up to very recently it was impossible to get free verse printed in any periodical except those in which Pound had influence; and that now it is possible to print free verse (second, third, or tenth-rate) in almost any American magazine. Who is responsible for the bad free verse is a question of no importance, inasmuch as its authors would have written bad verse in any form; Pound has at least the right to be judged by the success or failure of his own. Pound's *vers libre* is such as is only possible for a poet who has worked tirelessly with rigid forms and different systems of metric. His "Canzoni" are in a way aside from his direct line of progress; they are much more nearly studies in mediaeval appreciation than any of his other verse; but they are interesting, apart from their merit, as showing the poet at work with the most intricate Provençal forms—so intricate that the pattern cannot be exhibited without quoting an entire poem. (M. Jean de Bosschere, whose French is translated in the "Egoist," has already called attention to the fact that Pound was the first writer in English to use five Provençal forms.) Quotation will show, however, the great variety of rhythm which Pound manages to introduce into the ordinary iambic pentameter:

Thy gracious ways,
O lady of my heart, have
O'er all my thought their golden glamour cast;
As amber torch-flames, where strange men-at-arms
Tread softly 'neath the damask shield of night,
Rise from the flowing steel in part reflected,
So on my mailed thought that with thee goeth,
Though dark the way, a golden glamour falleth.

Within the iambic limits, there are no two lines in the whole poem that have an identical rhythm.

We turn from this to a poem in "Exultations," the "Night Litany":

O God, what great kindness
have we done in times past
and forgotten it,
That thou givest this wonder unto us,
O God of waters?

O God of the night
What great sorrow
Cometh unto us,
That thou thus repayest us
Before the time of its coming?

There is evident, and more strongly in certain later poems, a tendency toward quantitative measure. Such a "freedom" as this lays so heavy a burden upon every word in a line that it becomes impossible to write like Shelley, leaving blanks for the adjectives, or like Swinburne, whose adjectives are practically blanks. Other poets have manipulated a great variety of metres and forms; but few have studied the forms and metres which they use so carefully as has Pound. His ballad of the "Goodly Fere" shows great knowledge of the ballad form:

I ha' seen him cow a thousand men
On the hills o' Galilee,
They whined as he walked out calm between
Wi' his eyes like the grey o' the sea.

Like the sea that brooks no voyaging
With the winds unleashed and free,
Like the sea that he cowed at Genseret
Wi' twey words spoke suddenly.

A master of men was the Goodly Fere
A mate of the wind and sea,
If they think they ha' slain our Goodly Fere
They are fools eternally.

I ha' seen him eat o' the honey-comb
Sin' they nailed him to the tree.

And from this we turn to a very different form in the "Altaforte," which is perhaps the best sestina that has been written in English:

Damn it all! all this our South stinks peace.
You whoreson dog, Papiols, come! let's to music!
I have no life save when the swords clash.
But ah! when I see the standards gold, vair, purple, opposing,
And the broad fields beneath them turn crimson,
Then howl I my heart nigh mad with rejoicing.

In hot summer have I great rejoicing
When the tempests kill the earth's foul peace,
And the lightnings from black heaven flash crimson,
And the fierce thunders roar me their music
And the winds shriek through the clouds mad, opposing,
And through all the riven skies God's swords clash.

I have quoted two verses to show the intricacy of the pattern.

The Provençal canzon, like the Elizabethan lyric, was written for music. Mr. Pound has more recently insisted, in a series of articles on the work of Arnold Dolmetsch, in the "Egoist," on the importance of a study of music for the poet.

Such a relation between poetry and music is very different from what is called the "music" of Shelley or Swinburne, a music often nearer to rhetoric (or the art of the orator) than to the instrument. For poetry to approach the condition of music (Pound quotes approvingly the dictum of Pater) it is not necessary that poetry should be destitute of meaning. Instead of slightly veiled and resonant abstractions, like

Time with a gift of tears,
Grief with a glass that ran—

of Swinburne, or the mossiness of Mallarmé, Pound's verse is always definite and concrete, because he has always a definite emotion behind it.

Though I've roamed through many places,
None there is that my heart troweth
Fair as that wherein fair groweth
One whose laud here interlaces
Tuneful words, that I've essayed.
Let this tune be gently played
Which my voice herward upraises.

At the end of this poem the author appends the note:

The form and measure are those of Pierre Vidal's "Ab
l'alen tir vas me l'aïre." The song is fit only to be
sung, and is not to be spoken.

There are, here and there, deliberate archaisms or oddities (e.g., "herward"); there are deliberately arbitrary images, having their place in the total effect of the poem:

Red leaf that art blown upward and out and over
The green sheaf of the world ...

The lotos that pours
Her fragrance into the purple cup ...

Black lightning ... (in a more recent poem)

but no word is ever chosen merely for the tinkle; each has always its part in producing an impression which is produced always through language. Words are perhaps the hardest of all material of art: for they must be used to express both visual beauty and beauty of sound, as well as communicating a grammatical statement. It would be interesting to compare Pound's use of images with Mallarmé's; I think it will be found that the former's, by the contrast, will appear always sharp in outline, even if arbitrary and not photographic. Such images as those quoted above are as precise in their way as

Sur le Noël, morte saison,
Lorsque les loups vivent de vent ...

and the rest of that memorable Testament.

So much for the imagery. As to the "freedom" of his verse, Pound has made several statements in his articles on Dolmetsch which are to the point:

Any work of art is a compound of freedom and order. It is perfectly obvious that art hangs between chaos on the one side and mechanics on the other. A pedantic insistence upon detail tends to drive out "major form." A firm hold on major form makes for a freedom of detail. In painting men intent on minutiae gradually lost the sense of form and form-

combination. An attempt to restore this sense is branded as "revolution." It is revolution in the philological sense of the term....

Art is a departure from fixed positions; felicitous departure from a norm....

The freedom of Pound's verse is rather a state of tension due to constant opposition between free and strict. There are not, as a matter of fact, two kinds of verse, the strict and the free; there is only a mastery which comes of being so well trained that form is an instinct and can be adapted to the particular purpose in hand.

After "Exultations" came the translation of the "Sonnets and Ballate of Guido Cavalcanti." It is worth noting that the writer of a long review in the "Quest"—speaking in praise of the translation, yet found fault with the author not on the ground of excessive mediaevalism, but because

he is concerned rather with the future than with a somewhat remote past, so that in spite of his love for the mediaeval poets, his very accomplishment as a distinctly modern poet makes against his success as a wholly acceptable translator of Cavalcanti, the heir of the Troubadours, the scholastic.

Yet the *Daily News*, in criticising "Canzoni," had remarked that Mr. Pound

seems to us rather a scholar than a poet, and we should like to see him giving his unusual talent more to direct translation from the Provençal.

and Mr. J. C. Squire (now the literary editor of the *New Statesman*), in an appreciative review in the *New Age*, had counselled the poet that he would

gain and not lose if he could forget all about the poets of Dante's day, their roses and their flames, their gold and their falcons, and their literary amorousness, and walk out of the library into the fresh air.

In "Ripostes" there are traces of a different idiom. Superficially, the work may appear less important. The diction is more restrained, the flights shorter, the dexterity of technique is less arresting. By romantic readers the book would be considered less "passionate." But there is a much more solid substratum to this book; there is more thought; greater depth, if less agitation on the surface. The effect of London is apparent; the author has become a critic of men, surveying them from a consistent and developed point of view; he is more formidable and disconcerting; in short, much more mature. That he abandons nothing of his technical skill is evident from the translation from the Anglo-Saxon, the "Seafarer." It is not a slight achievement to have brought to life alliterative verse: perhaps the "Seafarer" is the only successful piece of alliterative verse ever written in modern English; alliterative verse which is not merely a clever tour de force, but which suggests the possibility of a new development of this form. Mr. Richard Aldington (whose own accomplishments as a writer of vers libre qualify him to speak) called the poem "unparalleled and unsurpassable," and a writer in the *New Age* (a literary organ which has always been strongly opposed to metrical innovations) called it "one of the finest literary works of art produced in England during the last ten years." And the rough, stern beauty of the Anglo-Saxon, we may remark, is at the opposite pole from that of the Provençal and Italian poets to whom Pound had previously devoted his attention.

May I for my own self song's truth reckon,
Journey's jargon, how I in harsh days
Hardship endured oft.

But we can notice in "Ripostes" other evidences than of versatility only; certain poems show Mr. Pound turning to more modern subjects, as in the "Portrait d'une femme," or the mordant epigram, "An Object." Many readers are apt to confuse the maturing of personality with desiccation of the emotions. There is no desiccation in "Ripostes." This should be evident to anyone who reads carefully such a poem as "A Girl." We quote it entire without comment.

The tree has entered my hands,
The sap has ascended my arms,
The tree has grown in my breast—
Downward,
The branches grow out of me, like arms.

Tree you are,
Moss you are,
You are violets with wind above them.
A child—so high—you are,
And all this is folly to the world.

"The Return" is an important study in verse which is really quantitative. We quote only a few lines:

See, they return; ah, see the tentative
Movements, and the slow feet,
The trouble in the pace and the uncertain
Waivering!

"Ripostes" belongs to the period when Mr. Pound was being attacked because of his propaganda. He became known as the inventor of "Imagism," and later, as the "High Priest of Vorticism." As a matter of fact, the actual "propaganda" of Mr. Pound has been very small in quantity. The impression which his personality made, however, is suggested by the following note in "Punch," which is always a pretty reliable barometer of the English middle-class Grin:

Mr. Welkin Mark (exactly opposite Long Jane's) begs to announce that he has secured for the English market the palpitating works of the new Montana (U.S.A.) poet, Mr. Ezekiel Ton, who is the most remarkable thing in poetry since Robert Browning. Mr. Ton, who has left America to reside for a while in London and impress his personality on English editors, publishers and readers, is by far the newest poet going, whatever other advertisements may say. He has succeeded, where all others have failed, in evolving a blend of the imagery of the unfettered West, the vocabulary of Wardour Street, and the sinister abandon of Borgiac Italy.

In 1913, someone writing to the *New York Nation* from the University of Illinois, illustrates the American, more serious, disapproval. This writer begins by expressing his objections to the "principle of Futurism." (Pound has perhaps done more than anyone to keep Futurism out of England. His antagonism to this movement was the first which was not due merely to unintelligent dislike for anything new, and was due to his perception that Futurism was incompatible with any principles of form. In his own words, Futurism is "accelerated impressionism.") The writer in the *Nation* then goes on to analyze the modern "hypertrophy of romanticism" into

The exaggeration of the importance of a personal emotion.
The abandonment of all standards of form.
The suppression of all evidence that a particular composition
is animated by any directing intelligence.

As for the first point, here are Mr. Pound's words in answer to the question, "do you agree that the great poet is never emotional?"

Yes, absolutely; if by emotion is meant that he is at the mercy of every passing mood.... The only kind of emotion worthy of a poet is the inspirational emotion which energises and strengthens, and which is very remote from the everyday emotion of sloppiness and sentiment....

And as for the platform of Imagism, here are a few of Pound's "Don'ts for Imagists":

Pay no attention to the criticisms of men who have never themselves written a notable work.

Use no superfluous word and no adjective which does not reveal something.

Go in fear of abstractions. Don't retail in mediocre verse what has already been done in good prose.

Don't imagine that the art of poetry is any simpler than the art of music or that you can please the expert before you have spent at least as much effort on the art of verse as the average piano teacher spends on the art of music.

Be influenced by as many great artists as you can, but have the decency either to acknowledge the debt outright or try to conceal it.

Consider the definiteness of Dante's presentation as compared with Milton's. Read as much of Wordsworth as does not seem to be unutterably dull.

If you want the gist of the matter go to Sappho, Catullus, Villon when he is in the vein, Gautier when he is not too frigid, or if you have not the tongues seek out the leisurely Chaucer.

Good prose will do you no harm. There is good discipline to be had by trying to write it. Translation is also good training.

The emphasis here is certainly on discipline and form. The Chicago *Tribune* recognized this as "sound sense," adding:

If this is Imagism ... we are for establishing Imagism by constitutional amendment and imprisoning without recourse to ink or paper all "literary" ladies or gents who break any of these canons.

But other reviewers were less approving. While the writer in the *Nation*, quoted above, dreads the anarchy impending, Mr. William Archer was terrified at the prospect of hieratic formalisation. Mr. Archer believes in the simple untaught muse:

Mr. Pound's commandments tend too much to make of poetry a learned, self-conscious craft, to be cultivated by a guild of adepts, from whose austere laboratories spontaneity and simplicity are excluded.... A great deal of the best poetry in the world has very little technical study behind it.... There are scores and hundreds of people in England who could write this simple metre (i.e. of "A Shropshire Lad") successfully.

To be hanged for a cat and drowned for a rat is, perhaps, sufficient exculpation.

Probably Mr. Pound has won odium not so much by his theories as by his unstinted praise of certain contemporary authors whose work he has liked. Such expressions of approval are usually taken as a grievance—much more so than any personal abuse, which is comparatively a compliment—by the writers who escape his mention. He does not say "A., B., and C. are bad poets or novelists," but when he says "The work of X., Y., and Z. is in such and such respects the most important work in verse (or prose) since so and so," then A., B., and C. are aggrieved. Also, Pound has frequently expressed disapproval of Milton and Wordsworth.

After "Ripostes," Mr. Pound's idiom has advanced still farther. Inasmuch as "Cathay," the volume of translations from the Chinese, appeared prior to "Lustra," it is sometimes thought that his newer idiom is due to the Chinese influence. This is almost the reverse of the truth. The late Ernest Fenollosa left a quantity of manuscripts, including a great number of rough translations (literally exact) from the Chinese. After certain poems subsequently incorporated in "Lustra" had appeared in "Poetry," Mrs. Fenollosa recognized that in Pound the Chinese manuscripts would find the interpreter whom her husband would have wished; she accordingly forwarded the papers for him to do as he liked with. It is thus due to Mrs. Fenollosa's acumen that we have "Cathay"; it is not as a consequence of "Cathay" that we have "Lustra." This fact must be borne in mind.

Poems afterward embodied in "Lustra" appeared in "Poetry," in April, 1913, under the title of "Contemporanea." They included among others "Tenzone," "The Condolence," "The Garret," "Salutation the Second," and "Dance Figure."

There are influences, but deviously. It is rather a gradual development of experience into which literary experiences have entered. These have not brought the bondage of temporary enthusiasms, but have liberated the poet from his former restricted sphere. There is Catullus and Martial, Gautier, Laforgue and Tristan Corbière. Whitman is certainly not an influence; there is not a trace of him anywhere; Whitman and Mr. Pound are antipodean to each other. Of "Contemporanea" the *Chicago Evening Post* discriminatingly observed:

Your poems in the April Poetry are so mockingly, so delicately, so unblushingly beautiful that you seem to have brought back into the world a grace which (probably) never existed, but which we discover by an imaginative process in Horace and Catullus.

It was a true insight to ally Pound to the Latin, not to the Greek poets.

Certain of the poems in "Lustra" have offended admirers of the verse of the "Personae" period. When a poet alters or develops, many of his admirers are sure to drop off. Any poet, if he is to survive as a writer beyond his twenty-fifth year, must alter; he must seek new literary influences; he will have different emotions to express. This is disconcerting to that public which likes a poet to spin his whole work out of the feelings of his youth; which likes to be able to open a new volume of his poems with the assurance that they will be able to approach it exactly as they approached the preceding. They do not like that constant readjustment which the following of Mr. Pound's work demands. Thus has "Lustra" been a disappointment to some; though it manifests no falling off in technique, and no impoverishment of feeling. Some of the poems (including several of the "Contemporanea") are a more direct statement of views than Pound's verse had ever given before. Of these poems, M. Jean de Bosschère writes:

Everywhere his poems incite man to exist, to profess a becoming egotism, without which there can be no real altruism.

I beseech you enter your life.
I beseech you learn to say "I"
When I question you.
For you are no part, but a whole;
No portion, but a being.

... One must be capable of reacting to stimuli for a moment, as a real, live person, even in face of as much of one's own powers as are arrayed against one;... The virile complaint, the revolt of the poet, all which shows his emotion,—that is poetry.

Speak against unconscious oppression,
Speak against the tyranny of the unimaginative,
Speak against bonds.

Be against all forms of oppression,
Go out and defy opinion.

This is the old cry of the poet, but more precise, as an expression of frank disgust:

Go to the adolescent who are smothered in family.
O, how hideous it is
To see three generations of one house gathered together!
It is like an old tree without shoots,
And with some branches rotted and falling.

Each poem holds out these cries of revolt or disgust, but they are the result of his still hoping and feeling:

Let us take arms against this sea of stupidities. Pound... has experience of the folly of the Philistines who read his verse. Real pain is born of this stupid interpretation, and one does not realize how deep it is unless one can feel, through the ejaculations and the laughter, what has caused these wounds, which are made deeper by what he knows, and what he has lost....

The tone, which is at once jocund and keen, is one of Pound's qualities. Ovid, Catullus—he does not disown them. He only uses these accents for his familiars; with the others he is on the edge of paradox, pamphleteering, indeed of abuse....

This is the proper approach to the poems at the beginning of "Lustra," and to the short epigrams, which some readers find "pointless," or certainly "not poetry." They should read, then, the "Dance Figure," or "Near Périgord," and remember that all these poems come out of the same man.

Thine arms are as a young sapling under the bark;
Thy face as a river with lights.

White as an almond are thy shoulders;
As new almonds stripped from the husk.

Or the ending of "Near Périgord":

Bewildering spring, and by the Auvezère
Poppies and day's-eyes in the green émail
Rose over us; and we knew all that stream,
And our two horses had traced out the valleys;
Knew the low flooded lands squared out with poplars,
In the young days when the deep sky befriended.
And great wings beat above us in the twilight,

And the great wheels in heaven
Bore us together ... surging ... and apart ...
Believing we should meet with lips and hands ...

There shut up in his castle, Tairiran's,
She who had nor ears nor tongue save in her hands,
Gone, ah, gone-untouched, unreachable!
She who could never live save through one person,
She who could never speak save to one person,
And all the rest of her a shifting change,
A broken bundle of mirrors...!

Then turn at once to "To a Friend Writing on Cabaret Dancers."

It is easy to say that the language of "Cathay" is due to the Chinese. If one looks carefully at (1) Pound's other verse, (2) other people's translations from the Chinese (e.g., Giles's), it is evident that this is not the case. The language was ready for the Chinese poetry. Compare, for instance, a passage from "Provincia Deserta":

I have walked into Périgord
I have seen the torch-flames, high-leaping,
Painting the front of that church,-
And, under the dark, whirling laughter,
I have looked back over the stream
and seen the high building,
Seen the long minarets, the white shafts.
I have gone in Ribeyrac,
and in Sarlat.
I have climbed rickety stairs, heard talk of Croy,
Walked over En Bertran's old layout,
Have seen Narbonne, and Cahors and Chalus,
Have seen Excideuil, carefully fashioned.

with a passage from "The River Song":

He goes out to Hori, to look at the wing-flapping storks,
He returns by way of Sei rock, to hear the new nightingales,
For the gardens at Jo-run are full of new nightingales,
Their sound is mixed in this flute,
Their voice is in the twelve pipes here.

It matters very little how much is due to Rihaku and how much to Pound. Mr. Ford Madox Hueffer has observed: "If these are original verses, then Mr. Pound is the greatest poet of this day." He goes on to say:

The poems in "Cathay" are things of a supreme beauty. What poetry should be, that they are. And if a new breath of imagery and handling can do anything for our poetry, that new breath these poems bring....

Poetry consists in so rendering concrete objects that the emotions produced by the objects shall arise in the reader....

Where have you better rendered, or more permanently beautiful a rendering of, the feelings of one of those lonely watchers, in the outposts of progress, whether it be Ovid in Hyrcania, a Roman sentinel upon the great wall of this country, or merely ourselves, in the lonely recesses of our minds, than the "Lament of the Frontier Guard"?

Beauty is a very valuable thing; perhaps it is the most valuable thing in life; but the power to express emotion so that it shall communicate itself intact and exactly is almost more valuable. Of both these qualities Mr. Pound's book is very full. Therefore, I think we may say that this is much the best work he has done, for, however closely he may have followed his originals—and of that most of us have no means of judging—there is certainly a good deal of Mr. Pound in this little volume.

"Cathay" and "Lustra" were followed by the translations of Noh plays. The Noh are not so important as the Chinese poems (certainly not so important for English); the attitude is less unusual to us; the work is not so solid, so firm. "Cathay" will, I believe, rank with the "Sea-Farer" in the future among Mr. Pound's original work; the Noh will rank among his translations. It is rather a dessert after "Cathay." There are, however, passages which, as Pound has handled them, are different both from the Chinese and from anything existent in English. There is, for example, the fine speech of the old Kagekiyo, as he thinks of his youthful valour:

He thought, how easy this killing. He rushed with his spearhaft gripped under his arm. He cried out, "I am Kagekiyo of the Heike." He rushed on to take them. He pierced through the helmet vizards of Miyanya. Miyanya fled twice, and again; and Kagekiyo cried: "You shall not escape me!" He leaped and wrenched off his helmet. "Eya!" The vizard broke and remained in his hand, and Miyanya still fled afar, and afar, and he looked back crying in terror, "How terrible, how heavy your arm!" And Kagekiyo called at him, "How tough the shaft of your neck is!" And they both laughed out over the battle, and went off each his own way.

The "Times Literary Supplement" spoke of Mr. Pound's "mastery of beautiful diction" and his "cunningly rhythmically prose," in its review of the "Noh."

Even since "Lustra," Mr. Pound has moved again. This move is to the epic, of which three cantos appear in the American "Lustra" (they have already appeared in "Poetry"—Miss Monroe deserves great honour for her courage in printing an epic poem in this twentieth century—but the version in "Lustra" is revised and is improved by revision). We will leave it as a test: when anyone has studied Mr. Pound's poems in chronological order, and has mastered "Lustra" and "Cathay," he is prepared for the Cantos—but not till then. If the reader then fails to like them, he has probably omitted some step in his progress, and had better go back and retrace the journey.

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